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NO MORE HEROES: WESTERN HISTORY IN PUBLIC PLACES

MARSHA WEISIGER

IN 1994, RICHARD WHITE and the Newberry Library created a subversive exhibit titled *The Frontier in American Culture*, which powerfully paired the two master narratives that Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody presented at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Turner delivered his scholarly paper to a small group of historians at the Chicago Art Institute while Cody performed his Wild West extravaganza in front of a midway grandstand filled with perhaps eighteen thousand people. Turner spoke of the orderly settlement of a seemingly empty continent and the creation of a distinctive American culture; Cody told of violently wresting the continent from the Indian peoples who occupied the land. Each man claimed to represent history and—as different as these two stories were—each led to a remarkably similar conclusion: the frontier had come to a close. As visitors to the Newberry made their way through the exhibit, they could not help but conclude that both Turner and Cody engaged in myth-making. And those myths had consequences. When Turner erased indigenous people from mental maps of the “frontier,” he absolved Americans from blame for the appropriation of Indian homelands. Similarly, when Cody focused on Custer's defeat at the Little Bighorn and showed Indians attacking apparently helpless pioneers, he turned the truth upside down and encouraged Americans to think of themselves as the victims of the Indian Wars rather than as aggressors.¹

Viewing a traveling version of this exhibit at the public library in Las Cruces, New Mexico—one of the last stops on a national tour that ended in 2001—I was delighted to see the insights of the new western history brought into the public arena. The public was not always quite as thrilled. When the exhibit first opened in Chicago, some visitors applauded White's interpretation while others jeered that it

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¹ Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley, 1994).

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was “slanted,” “cynical,” “revisionist crap.”² Some, it seemed, had difficulties letting go of their mythic heroes.

The critical stance that White took with his exhibit is now *de rigueur* among historians of the American West, but how well has that been translated into forms that engage the public? Whether we like it or not, relatively few Americans read academic books. Most learn about history from the History Channel, historical museums, historic sites, and the like. It’s safe to say that the recent insights of western historians—the complex relationships between colonists and indigenes; the legacies of conquest; the struggles over power; the multiethnic, gendered, and environmental histories of the region—haven’t infiltrated cable television, but what about museums and historic sites?³ The answer, unfortunately, is that they interpret history poorly, although there are a handful of notable exceptions.

The typical museum is a historic house museum or a local history museum, neither of which interprets much history. True, some house museums evoke a sense of life in the past—but only for the upper crust—and most are, quite frankly, boring. Among the exceptions are the Old Homestead House Museum in Cripple Creek, Colorado, a former brothel, where tourists learn about prostitutes in mining towns, and the Magoffin Home State Historic Site, in El Paso, Texas, which tells the story of a multicultural—albeit elite—family in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.⁴ More ubiquitous are local history museums like the one I visited about an hour north of my home in New Mexico. Crammed with a hodgepodge of artifacts—a mammoth skull; the American flag that flew over Elephant Butte Dam at its dedication in 1916; a bank teller’s booth; a large display of ancient Indian pottery; a faux log cabin filled with assorted, unidentified farm implements; some barbed wire; a collection of fiesta dresses—the museum offered no interpretation whatsoever. Museums like this, with nearly the same set of artifacts, dot the American West. No professional organization keeps track of how many people visit these museums, but I’d bet that for many Americans, these curiosity cabinets are their primary sources of western “history.”

I could blame this state of affairs on the fact that many local museums are operated by community volunteers with little or no professional training, but that would be disingenuous. The problem lies, in part, with public history programs, particularly those that offer a terminal master’s degree. Many of them provide excellent—even innovative—training in museum studies and historic site interpretation. And yet no

² Walter Nugent, exhibit review of “The Frontier in American Culture,” *Journal of American History* 82 (December 1995): 1148.

³ See Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987), 27–30 and Donald Worster, “Beyond the Agrarian Myth,” in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, 1991), 3–25.

⁴ Jan MacKell, “From the Old Homestead to the Mustang Ranch: Prostitution, Preservation, and Public History in the American West,” in *Preserving Western History*, ed. Andrew Gulliford (Albuquerque, 2005), 226–7. My observation of the Magoffin Home is based on my own visit.

public history program that I know of requires formal training in the history of the American West.⁵ In my own experience at New Mexico State University, perhaps half of my public history graduate students took courses on the West. Many more gained at least a rudimentary background through their internships at regional museums and sites. But I cannot help but think that as public history educators, we could focus more on producing sophisticated interpreters of the American West.

Still, I'm happy to report that a number of major western museums have recently revamped their galleries or installed important temporary exhibits, often to provide perspectives informed by recent scholarship.⁶ Indeed, in some cases, cutting-edge scholars themselves have created these displays. Take, for example, the *Coming to California* exhibit at the Oakland Museum of California, where historian Louise Pubols is the chief curator of history. *Coming to California* focuses on the state's ethnic and cultural diversity, and while it emphasizes the hopes and dreams that motivated people to move to the Golden State from all over the world, it doesn't elide the "brutal conquest, racism, and environmental degradation" that dampened those dreams.⁷ I have yet to visit this museum—and as Pubols herself notes, the effectiveness of an exhibit can be understood only in three-dimensional space—but the public has responded well. One visitor raved about the inclusion of the stories of those who've been marginalized in the past. Another commented that the exhibit "allows for deeper analysis and can draw in viewers to think critically about the great depression [sic], about the idealism of the [19]60s and about what makes something worth remembering."⁸ It's worth noting that these visitors responded most enthusiastically to the history of the twentieth century, which seemed to speak to their own pasts.

Even museums without complete makeovers have signaled their embrace of a more inclusive, critical approach to western history. For some time, the Autry National Center in Los Angeles—historically and imaginatively associated with singing cowboy Gene Autry and the celebration of a romantic idea of the West, filled with cowboys and Indians—has endeavored to showcase new interpretations of history with updated permanent galleries and temporary shows. Recently, curator Carolyn Brucken

⁵ I base this observation on a survey of public history curricula available through "Public History Degree Programs by State and Country," Public History Resource Center, last modified 15 August 2007, http://www.publichistory.org/education/study_state_choose.asp.

⁶ Gregory E. Smoak, "Beyond the Academy: Making the New Western History Matter in Local Communities," *Public Historian* 31 (Fall 2009): 85–9 and Carroll Van West, "History and Interpretation at the Western History Museum," in Gulliford, *Preserving Western History*, 57–64.

⁷ Oakland Museum of California, "Coming to California: The New Gallery of California History, Exhibition Narrative Description, Draft 4," 3 (unpublished manuscript, courtesy of Louise Pubols, in author's possession).

⁸ Billy Jam, "Recently Refurbished Oakland Museum of California Has Created a New Model That Is More in Conversation with Its Attendees," *Amoeblog* (blog), 19 May 2010, <http://www.amoeba.com/blog/2010/05/jamoblog/recently-refurbished-oakland-museum-of-california-has-created-a-new-model-that-is-more-in-conversation-with-its-attendees.html> and Stephanie W., review, *Yelp.com*, 11 May 2010, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/oakland-museum-of-california-oakland>.

and Virginia Scharff, professor of history at the University of New Mexico and the Women of the West chair at the Autry, created an exhibit called *Home Lands: How Women Made the West*. Focusing on the Rio Arriba of northern New Mexico, the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, and the Puget Sound area, *Home Lands* explores “how women encountered and transformed” three distinctive western landscapes and “made them home.” We’ve all seen some of the older artifacts in this exhibit—the ubiquitous Ancestral Pueblo bowls and jars, fiber baskets, wool blankets, awls, hide scrapers—what’s been missing from most museums, however, is the explanation provided here: women made these objects and used them to provide food, water, and clothing for their families as well as trade goods for market. And while the exhibit celebrates women’s accomplishments in the West, it also highlights the kinds of topics that are in the scholarly mainstream yet shunned as too controversial by many museums: Navajo women slaves in Spanish colonial households, discrimination against Denver’s first black female doctor, the forced relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II.⁹ Telling these stories acknowledges the often grim history of the West and reflects the region’s ethnic character.

In a similar vein, historian Cindy Ott created a provocative exhibit for the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana, titled *Crossing Cultural Fences: The Intersecting Material World of American Indians and Euro-Americans*. The exhibit juxtaposed Plains Indian and Euro-American artifacts, such as an eagle feather bonnet and a Victorian woman’s bird hat, to explore “ideas about nature, aesthetics, and prestige” and to “complicate popular concepts of racial and ethnic distinction.”¹⁰ According to one reviewer, the exhibition raised interesting questions regarding the ways that people ascribe cultural significance to material objects and asked visitors “to ponder the complex meanings” of artifacts that refuse simple cultural categorizations.¹¹

Unfortunately, not every museum has fully succeeded with its new installations. The New Mexico History Museum, which recently opened in a new building adjacent to the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, fails to fully convey the exciting recent scholarship on the state’s history in its permanent galleries. In part this may be due to its desire to offend no one. In a place where Hispanos revere the Spanish conquistador Don Juan de Oñate as the founder of New Mexico while Native people revile him as the “butcher of Acoma” for ordering the mutilation of male rebels, showing respect

⁹ Louise Pubols, “The Singing Cowboy and the Professor: The New West at the Autry National Center,” *Public Historian* 31 (November 2009): 71–6 and Autry National Center, “Home Lands” (unpublished manuscript, courtesy of Carolyn Brucken, in author’s possession). See also Virginia Scharff and Carolyn Brucken, *Home Lands: How Women Made the West* (Los Angeles, 2010).

¹⁰ Cindy Ott, “Crossing Cultural Fences: The Intersecting Material World of American Indians and Euro-Americans,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 39 (Winter 2008): 497, 491.

¹¹ Mary Murphy, exhibit review of “Crossing Cultural Fences: The Intersecting Material World of American Indians and Euro-Americans,” *Journal of American History* 94 (June 2007): 209.

for the state's diverse audiences—one of the museum's main goals—is mighty difficult. And yet a critical stance does not necessarily require one to take sides, only to pose questions and offer sufficient evidence and context to allow viewers to decide.¹²

Don't get me wrong: it's obvious that a good deal of care went into the exhibits on New Mexico's history through the 1870s. Many of the artifacts and photographs (some newly unearthed from the archives) are fascinating and imaginatively displayed. The exhibits also make clear that New Mexico has long been a meeting ground for different cultures and that those cultures have clashed, sometimes violently. Still, they disclose little of the motivations and passions behind those clashes. They explain what happened without really explaining why. That's too bad, because the tourists with whom I walked through the galleries—accompanied by an excellent docent, who offered a more complicated interpretation of history not available in the exhibits themselves—craved complexity. Contrary to the notion that Americans want museums to reinforce a heroic notion of the past, these visitors seemed to want to see the past anew.¹³ Clearly, the strength of the museum's collections is the colonial and early territorial periods. The treatment of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries seems, at best, an afterthought, leaving the impression that the history of New Mexico did indeed effectively end well before 1890.¹⁴ True, I saw an excellent temporary installation on Ernest Thompson Seton, the wildlife writer and founder of the Woodcraft Indians, but it was tucked away from the main flow of visitors on an upper floor. That the main galleries gave short shrift to modern history is regrettable, not only because some of New Mexico's most significant contributions to our nation's history came in the twentieth century, but because the public tends to connect most viscerally to the history of their parents' and grandparents' generations.¹⁵

A handful of historic sites managed by the National Park Service (NPS) address those living memories and confront controversial issues that once seemed taboo. Most of these were established in the 1990s and 2000s, in the wake of the new western history. Notable among these is Manzanar National Historic Site, which explores the painful history of Japanese American relocation from the West Coast. The Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in Oklahoma, created in cooperation with Cheyennes and Arapahos, tells of the massacre of Black Kettle and his followers, with particular attention to the endurance of Native peoples and their cultures. And the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park in Texas, where the U.S.-Mexico War began,

¹² Spencer R. Crew, "Who Owns History?: History in the Museum," *History Teacher* 30 (November 1996): 83–8.

¹³ For a contrary view, see Andrew Gulliford, "Headnotes," in Gulliford, *Preserving Western History*, 46.

¹⁴ This discussion is based on my own visits and New Mexico History Museum, "Education and Interpretive Plan for the New Mexico History Museum" (unpublished manuscript, 2003, courtesy of Frances Levine, in author's possession).

¹⁵ See Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998).

explains both Mexican and U.S. viewpoints.¹⁶ Admittedly, the process of interpreting contested sites is not always smooth. At the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, where in 1864 Colonel John M. Chivington attacked a peaceful encampment of Cheyennes and Arapahos, archaeologists and representatives of the tribes have disagreed about the actual location of the massacre. The archaeological record appears to conflict with maps drawn by the eyewitness George Bent and tribal oral traditions, and it remains to be seen whether these differences can be reconciled. Still, the NPS and the tribes remain committed to creating an interpretive landscape that conveys all sides of the story.¹⁷

At a few older sites, too, interpreters have responded to demands from formerly marginalized groups to impart a more inclusive, accurate story of the past. Take, for example, the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, formerly the Custer Battlefield. Whereas visitors once learned exclusively of the martyrdom of George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, today they are encouraged to tour the site of the Indian village for a more realistic perspective of a battle between cultures; and an Indian Memorial counterbalances the commemoration of the cavalry.¹⁸ Likewise, the staff at Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, reconstructed on its original site in southern Colorado, have endeavored to recast the story of the trading post with costumed interpreters. When William Bent completed the original structure in 1833, its location on the Arkansas River was the border between the United States and Mexico. Until recently, visitors would have learned primarily about the building itself (without mention of its reconstruction), westward expansion, and the biographies of the Bent brothers and Ceran St. Vrain. Since 2006, however, interpreters have emphasized the exploration of the "interactions of diverse cultures" in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the ideas of "security, sovereignty, and culture in the American West."¹⁹ And in

¹⁶ "Manzanar National Historic Site," National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/manz/index.html>; Robert L. Spude, "On the Plain of Sand Creek, in the Valley of Washita," *Perspectives on History* (May 2008), last modified 22 April 2010, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0805/0805pub1.cfm>; and Richard Sellars, personal communication with author, September 2010.

¹⁷ Christine Whitacre, "The Search for the Site of the Sand Creek Massacre," in *Preserving Western History*, 175–88; Elizabeth Mitchell, "Sand Creek Massacre Site: An Environmental History," January 2007, <http://www.nps.gov/sand/historyculture/upload/Sand%20Creek%20-%20An%20Environmental%20History-1-2.pdf>; and Ari Kelman, *The Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Edward T. Linenthal, "Committing History in Public," *Journal of American History* 81 (December 1994): 987.

¹⁹ National Park Service, "Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site: Final Master Plan; Interpretive Prospectus, Development Concept," November 1975 and "Long-Range Interpretive Plan, Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site," September 2006, 11 (both courtesy of Patrick Weber, in author's possession). See William W. Gwaltney, "Way Across the Wide Missouri: Western History, Memory, and the Lunatic Fringe," *Western Historical Quarterly* 32 (Winter 2001): 493–9.

recognition of the growing Latino population in southern Colorado, a new Hispanic heritage celebration acknowledges that the majority of the workers at the fort in its heyday were Mexican and that Spanish was the prevailing language.²⁰ Considering that the West's national historic sites attract tens of thousands of visitors each year, western historians themselves have cause to celebrate.

And yet most NPS sites remain solidly mired in the old western history. The military forts, which comprise roughly one-third of the region's national historic sites and parks, especially, cling to older interpretations. According to Dwight T. Pitcaithley, former NPS chief historian, change comes slowly because of inertia and budgetary woes and because local constituencies (and long-term employees) embrace what we might call the John Wayne version of "cavalry and Indian history." But there's a more fundamental, structural problem with the organization of the NPS: at the highest decision-making levels, professional historians typically work in the division charged with preserving cultural resources, not interpreting them; and it's a rare site that has a professionally trained historian (rather than an archaeologist assuming the role) on staff.²¹ Still, there is opportunity at hand to help reinterpret the West's historic sites. Under a cooperative agreement with the Organization of American Historians, the NPS is studying the prospects for interpreting the history of the buffalo soldiers, African Americans on the overland trails, the Chinese American experience, and military trails significant to the Indian Wars, as well as the environmental history of the western parks.²² Building on its success in reinterpreting Civil War battlefields, moreover, NPS, in cooperation with OAH, is laying the groundwork for a reinterpretation of western forts. So the time is ripe for us, as western historians, to don our public history hats and offer our consulting services.²³ We *must* do so, for these symbols of conquest and control during and after the Indian Wars are just as shamefully in need of reinterpretation as the Civil War battlefields once were.²⁴

Despite the occasional complaint about "revisionist crap," I think the public is hungry for an understanding of the past that is less about the sugar-coated, mythic West and more about its sometimes less palatable historical realities. People are seeking a past that explains the present. I saw this one day on my way home from Denver. I pulled off the highway and drove half a mile to the Ludlow Massacre Memorial and Monument, created by the United Mine Workers of America. It's a surprisingly excellent exhibit,

²⁰ Anthony A. Mestas, "Fort to Celebrate Hispanic Heritage," *Pueblo (CO) Chieftan*, 15 September 2010.


²¹ Dwight T. Pitcaithley, discussions with author, August and September 2010.

²² "OAH/NPS Current Projects," Organization of American Historians, http://www.oah.org/programs/nps/current_projects.html.

²³ "OAH/NPS Collaboration," Organization of American Historians, <http://www.oah.org/programs/nps/>. For specific questions about the OAH-NPS collaboration, contact the OAH Public History Manager.

²⁴ Dwight T. Pitcaithley, "Being Born Western and the Challenges of Public History," in Gulliford, *Preserving Western History*, 389–94.

complete with a granite monument and a set of interpretive panels narrating the history and archaeology of class warfare in southern Colorado.²⁵ I figured I'd be the only person in this out-of-the-way spot. But over the course of twenty minutes, perhaps a half dozen people appeared. They, too, spent a good deal of time examining the display and contemplating the site. It seemed that they were looking for a history that spoke to their own working-class lives. Museums and historic sites need to respond or risk becoming irrelevant.



²⁵ Philip Duke et al., "The Colorado Coalfield War Archaeological Project: Archaeology Serving Labor," in Gulliford, *Preserving Western History*, 32–43 and James Green and Elizabeth Jameson, "Marking Labor History on the National Landscape: The Restored Ludlow Memorial and Its Significance," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 76 (Fall 2009): 6–25.